

Rhode Island:
Coastal Resources Management Council
Department of Environmental Management
Division of Planning, Statewide Planning Program

RI State Guide Plan Update:
Water Quality Management Plan Advisory Committee Meeting

Tuesday, October 22, 2013

10:00 AM – 12:00 PM

Room 280
Department of Environmental Management
235 Promenade Street, Providence

Meeting Notes

Greetings and Introduction of Members

Committee Members in attendance were: Jane Austin (Save The Bay), Eric Boettger (NRCS), Janine Burke (NWPCA), Kathy Crawley (WRB), , Ames Colt (BRWCT), , Peter Healey (RIDOT), Alicia Leher (Woonasquatucket WC), Eugenia Marks (RI Audubon), Vincent Murray (SK Planning Dept.), Jennifer Paquet (Town of West Greenwich), Margharita Pryor (EPA), Marilyn Shellman (Town of Westerly), Judith Swift (URI). DEM/Statewide Planning staff in attendance included: Nancy Hess, Sue Kiernan, Erinie Panciera, Jon Zwarg and Paul Gonsalves. Guest speakers in attendance included George Loomis (URI) and Brian Moore (DEM).

Introduction and Agenda Overview

Nancy Hess started the meeting with a brief overview of the agenda, including key subject areas and contributions from two guest speakers.

Feedback on Issue Identification

There was a question regarding the topics to be included in the plan, specifically the connection between water quality and habitat. Sue added that no emailed comments were received on the outline and that habitat will be part of the plan. The group then discussed the idea of people taking water quality for

granted. Several added that many water quality problems remain. The issue of toxic substances including pharmaceuticals, in water bodies is one that the group agreed should not be overlooked.

Several people had questions about the timeframes involved. Nancy and Ernie explained that we are working with a few different timeframes in this plan. There will be 5-10 actions (short and medium), while the overall "vision" of the plan comes with a 20 year timeframe. General public awareness seemed to be another point of concern. Members agreed that many residents have a general lack of awareness with water issues. People notice when beach closures occur each summer, but basic public understanding of hydrology should be strengthened. More structured methods of education need to be addressed. John mentioned that many calls are taken from Realtors and their general understanding of water and wastewater issues could be improved. Brian stated that there is a training program at the RI Board of Realtors for septic issues in particular.

Watershed Planning Areas

Ernie led the discussion into the designated planning areas for watersheds in the states. He explained the Hydrologic Unit Codes (HUC) for the watersheds in the state. Several watersheds cross state lines. Kathy mentioned that the WRB has done some recent work with USGS that could be beneficial to share with the group.

Onsite Wastewater Treatment Systems (OWTS)

Ernie began the discussion on OWTS by giving a background on state policy since 1995, when the Non-Point Source plan was released. The plan covered 5 areas and had 48 recommendations and 48 actions. The plan also looked at the cumulative effects of septic systems, as well as the size of systems. Brian then talked about DEM's process for permitting and regulating OWTSs. They average about 2,000 applications per year (includes alterations, repairs, etc.). The average turn-around time is 2.2 weeks (3-5 days for repairs). Variances can take much longer, based on the details of the relief sought. Group members had several questions about the processes involved. The question of the chronology of approvals came up, and it was answered by stating that DEM approvals come before local approvals. As for wetlands, the DEM approval comes after the wetlands approval. "Critical resources areas" were discussed, most notably areas near the salt ponds which have a 200 ft setback.

Several group members were concerned about the overlap of DEM and CRMC jurisdictions. When speaking of the success of setbacks, it was noted that there are some problem areas such as Jamestown, Charlestown and Bonnet Shores in

Narragansett. There has to be a mechanism to coordinate situations where the DEM and CRMC permitting standards are not in line with each other.

A question about cumulative impacts for future developments arose. Specifically, who looks at the incremental impacts in subdivision rules? DEM does look at nitrogen levels as cumulative impacts. Sue added that DEM does a cursory review for surface water, but an organized system does not exist for ground water, as it was not required under the Clean Water Act. A more thorough policy for looking at cumulative impacts should be considered for new developments. There is a need for policy for sewers based on population density. One member of the group went on to suggest that phosphorous in water levels could be a bigger issue.

The group members then discussed the idea of identifying general regions around the state where sewers can or cannot go, and if it were at all possible to require any municipality to get public water. George went on to describe a recent wastewater study in Chepatchet Village. The study involved identifying problems and finding creative ways that are not particularly difficult to engineer, as it was meant to inform areas that will not get municipal sewers.

Following the discussion on OWTS, there was a suggestion to also look into dealing with stormwater. Alternative systems were discussed as well. It was pointed out that the industry is slowly moving towards modularity and system costs are becoming more realistic for many homeowners.

The meeting finished up with a brief discussion about cesspools, as they are continuing to be phased out. It was suggested that the current system for phase-out needs to be revised.

Next Meeting Date

The group agreed upon a date of November 26th for the next meeting..